



# Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

February 2007

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

## What about the Boys? Update

Over the years, my response to the question, “what about the boys?” has fluctuated from the efficient “It’s not what I do”...to the frustrated “Just because we talk about girls doesn’t mean we *have* to talk about boys!”...to the sarcastic “what about ‘em?”

Currently, I offer the above “efficient” response (aka my short answer) encapsulated within a more thorough explanation. Included in that explanation, is the significance of research lag, a little background, and a broader perspective, among other things.

Historically, females have been left out of the research on juvenile justice and as a result programs and treatment modalities based on research using males as subjects were/are ill-suited to them. The reasons that exist for the exclusion of females as research subjects run from the simple to the complex. For example, young women have always been a much smaller portion of the juvenile justice population. This remains true today. In Iowa, males make up about 70% of this population at initial contact and 85% as the system is further penetrated. Sheer numbers ensure that young men will not be forgotten, ignored or insufficiently researched by that system.

Although there has been improvement in the *quality* of research on young women, there is still a long way to go for the volume of research to be on a par with what exists for males. Both quality and quantity of research are crucial. They provide validity and direction and inform decision making. The more and better research exists, the more and better “best practice” level programs will exist.

In my response to the “what about the boys?” question, I also find it useful to point out that “gender-specific” can apply to males. Males share common experiences like gender role messages. Evidence shows how something like traditional masculine gender role conformity can contribute to behaviors that bring young men into contact with the justice system. Looking at the juvenile justice system through a gender lens allows this type of dynamic to be examined. The result is more effective programs for males too. Just as we must abandon the adage, “girls will be girls”, we must also abandon, “boys will be boys”.

Most troubling to me when I am asked “what about the boys?” is the often apparent belief on the part of the questioner that there is a finite amount of care and concern that can be brought to bear. As if recognition of the fact that young women have been marginalized and a determination to change that fact means the needs of boys will become marginalized in exchange. The fear that giving more to the girls means less for the boys is not completely groundless given past precedent that relegated young women to leftovers in the juvenile justice system. But, doing a better job for system girls means doing a better job for the whole system, including boys. Hypervigilance is unwarranted.

It is not an either/or choice. Even if it boils down to being a money issue...and let’s face it, that is often the case...the question shouldn’t be which group is getting the funding that “should” be going to another group, but why aren’t there sufficient resources for everyone? Rather than resigning ourselves to begging for scraps from the table, advocates should be demanding answers about why services for young people and their families are not sufficiently funded so that everyone’s needs are being met.

**There is all the difference in the world  
between treating people equally and  
attempting to make them equal.**

*-Friedrich A. Hayek*

In the September 2000 issue, "Overview and Response to Questions about Boys", a former editor of the Girl Connection examined some common views that coalesce within the discussion of gender. Labeling gender-specific services as harmful, unnecessary or even (gasp) feminist were some of the topics explored.

In my experience as coordinator of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force (IGSSTF) and in running a program for girls, "what about the boys?" is one of the questions that comes up the most. It is posed by parents, funders, providers, and young women. Even as the IGSSTF began its work, over ten years ago, it was difficult for those involved to discuss young women without feeling compelled to discuss young men.

It seems that in an attempt to avoid the same errors in judgment as those who ignored girls in the juvenile justice system for so long, we sometimes overcompensate. However, there is a lot of catching up to do in terms of understanding what it means to be a young women involved in the juvenile justice system and what it means to effectively meet the needs of those young women. They deserve our time.

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## The Girl Connection

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